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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the nature of a theoretical school of transcendence as conceived by participants in a graduate course on the topic of transcendence in teacher-learner relationships. Transcendent teacher-learner relationships are spontaneously occurring ones in which teacher and learner transcend their traditional interactive roles. During the encounter, a turning point occurs for one or both participants, and life goals are altered or changed. The school of transcendence is designed to support transcendent pedagogy and interpersonal relationships. A study, comprised of students enrolled in the early childhood master's degree program at Towson University (Maryland), was conducted in which students were asked to theorize how a school characterized by trancendence might look and feel. Based on data collected, this paper contrasts the school of transcendence with the traditional school in terms of: philosophy and approach to creating learning encounters; curricula; planning and scheduling, assessment and evaluation; physical space; and school community interpersonal relationships. The paper discusses the traditional school as a place of violence, contrasting it with the safe environment of the school of transcendence, and it explains governance in the school of transcendence. Finally, the paper identifies transcendence-oriented approaches currently implemented in Reggio Emilia schools and presents a series of metaphors for the school of transcendence to help synthesize the data presented. (Contains 19 references.) (SM)

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The School of Transcendence

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The School of Transcendence

This discussion focuses on the nature of a theoretical *school of transcendence* as conceived by participants in a graduate course taught by myself on the topic of transcendence in teacher-learner relationships. *Transcendent teacher-learner relationships* are spontaneously occurring ones in which teacher and learner transcend, or go beyond, their traditional interactive roles. During the transcendent encounter a "turning point" occurs for one or both participants, and life goals are altered or changed. Just as transcendent relationships are characterized by particular qualities that include caring, trust, mutual respect and love, the school of transcendence is designed to support transcendent pedagogy and interpersonal relationships. Powerful transcendent relationships and correspondingly powerful learning encounters, such as did occur in the paradigmatic example of Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan, are invited by the transcendent school atmosphere.

The school of transcendence is contrasted with the traditional school in terms of philosophy and approach to creating learning encounters, curricula, planning and scheduling, assessment and evaluation, physical space and school community interpersonal relationships. A discussion of the traditional school as a place of violence is contrasted with the safe environment of the school of transcendence. Governance in the school of transcendence is explained. Finally, transcendence-oriented approaches currently implemented in Reggio Emelia schools are identified, and a series of metaphors for the school of transcendence are presented to help the reader synthesize and envision the data presented.

PERSPECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

The theoretical underpinnings for the school of transcendence emerges from study of transcendence in teacher-learner relationships (O'Hara, 1992, 1997). The conceptual and theoretical framework for transcendence in teacher-learner relationships derives from an integrated body of education literature. That body of literature includes educational philosophy, educational psychology and learning theory. The transcendent teacher-learner relationship (O'Hara, 1992)

may occur when relators move beyond *secure boundaries of endeavor*. Both teacher and learner must drop off conventions, rubrics and systems (Moustakas, 1966). To move beyond secure boundaries, both must trust and risk in the process of establishing limits, exercising self-discipline and responsibility. The learner's world must be received and understood by the teacher. As roles are transcended, a turning point may occur. Author of Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1989), Paulo Freire, writes of the importance of *reconciliation* in the pedagogical relationship, i.e., reconciling the poles of the teacher-learner contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and learners (p. 59). Together, teacher and learner may encounter a process involving the expanding of awareness, the emergence of new identity, and steps toward new life.

The teacher's traditional governance stance over children must be replaced by a new pedagogy of thoughtfulness and openness (Van Manen, 1991). It must include belief and confidence in the learner as well as the determination of challenging expectations. Such a pedagogy involves the tactful mediation of love and care, hope and trust, and responsibility. The mediation each of these requires is *tact*. Tact is not obtrusive but is subtle, hardly noticeable. It reads the inner life of the learner, intuiting when to intervene, when to remain silent. Tact creates a warm social atmosphere, a sensitive and flexible tone, but it is also firm, direct, decisive and open. Tact employs humor and stands for something.

"The facilitation of significant learning depends upon certain attitudinal qualities which exist in the personal relationship between the facilitator and the learner" (Rogers, 1967, p. 3). Buber (1958, 1965a, 1965b), Greene (1985, 1988), Palmer (1983), Rogers (1967), Maslow (1968), Macdonald (1974), Noddings (1984) and others have called for pedagogical relationships characterized by trust, care, and mutuality between teacher and learner. "One person enters a covenant with another, a pledge to engage in a mutually accountable and transforming relationship, a relationship forged of trust and faith in the face of unknowable risks" (Palmer, p. 31). Martin Buber emphasizes the importance of mutuality and intimacy in teacher-learner relationships (Buber, 1965a, p. 98-100). For relationships such as these to occur, the teacher must "view the world

through the [learner's] eyes" (Rogers, p. 8-9), and must "experience from the other side" (Buber, 1965, p. 8-9).

Transcendent teacher-learner interaction is mutually reciprocal, liberating, and growth oriented. Such interaction is authentic or genuine by virtue of the interweaving of the active and passive (receptive) pedagogical roles. Transcendent interaction is facilitated when there is a spontaneous, personal and biographically oriented attraction between two people. Any teacher-learner relational interaction created by virtue of planning, manipulation or deliberate assignment of individuals is inconsistent with the subject of this study. Again, the connection occurs spontaneously, but the transcendent relationship frequently endures for a lifetime.

METHODS / DATA SOURCE

The methodology applied in this study derives in part from Clark Moustakas' *heuristics* (1990). Heuristics provides a format for research that begins with researcher self-inquiry and then moves outward to the encounters of others. The heuristic researcher does not presuppose cause-effect relationships.

The population for this study is comprised of students enrolled in the early childhood master's degree program at Towson University. Data for this study were generated by students following their self-study, group research and collaborative exploration of transcendent teacher-learner relationships. Late in the course, having considered how transcendence emerges in teacher-learner relationships, their own and in the lives of others, the students were asked to theorize how a school characterized by transcendence might look and feel. At first students went through what Katherine Patrick (1955) has identified as the *preparation* stage of creativity. During this stage, the creator experiences doubt, disorganization, trial and error. I refer to this as the "cranky" stage of creativity. The crankiness emerged as students grappled with the theoretical restructuring of learning environments they had been schooled in as well as the ones where they were currently teaching. Students were baffled at, and frustrated by, the poor "fit," the incongruity between, on the one hand, traditional structures, and on the other hand transcendence, or the action of going

beyond traditional structures. Ultimately, students considered their own perceptions of the characteristics of the traditional school. Having identified those perceptions, they postulated about how the school of transcendence might go beyond traditional structures. Students characterized the traditional and the transcendent schools on chart paper following extended discussion.

The Teacher-Learner Relationships course was taught during the summer of 1997. In December of 1997 and January of 1998, using data collected during the course, I began to develop this paper. Simultaneously, I was studying the Reggio Emelia schools and was struck by how those schools mirror the school of transcendence conceived by my graduate students. Related Reggio Emelia practices and philosophy are discussed below. Drawing upon transcendent teacher-learner relationship research and the theoretical school of transcendence data collected during the course, I developed a series of metaphors for the school of transcendence. These metaphors are also included.

FINDINGS

The data collected draws sharp distinction between the traditional school and the school of transcendence. The traditional school refers to many schools that have existed in the past and continue to exist today. Perceptions of traditional school characteristics were gleaned from learning encounters that graduate course participants had during their education career as students. Those characteristics are renumerated in bullets, organized into six categories: philosophical orientation and approach to creating learning encounters, curricula and program implementation, planning and scheduling, assessment and evaluation, physical space, and school/community interpersonal relationships.

PHILOSOPHICAL ORIENTATION AND APPROACH TO CREATING LEARNING ENCOUNTERS

The Traditional School

- It is assumed that many learners will not be successful and that only *some* have gifts and talents (corresponding assumption - gifts and talents can be identified through formal testing).
- Teaching strategies, assessment and evaluation predispose some learners for success and many others for mediocrity or failure.
- As learners attempt to be successful, learning and evaluation strategies pit them against each other.
- Learning is an independent, passive, inactive and abstract experience.
- Learning strategies and discourse are didactic (one way) rather than dialectic (two way).
- Teachers view themselves as intellectually complete and learners as *tabula rosa* receptacles for data.
- Teachers place themselves center stage and place learners in the audience to be tested following the teacher's performance.
- Learner movement, choice and empowerment are regarded as permissiveness.
- Convergent thought is valued and developed to the exclusion of divergent, or creative thought (field trips are regarded as entertainment).
- Diversity is compensated for rather than valued and incorporated.

The School of Transcendence

- All learners are assumed to be gifted and talented. It is the facilitator's responsibility to identify those gifts and talents.
- Learning is active, hands-on, tactile, multisensory, and interdisciplinary. Abstract lecture and drill are rarely used.
- Learning encounters are relevant, and so they become meaningful.

- Open, two-way dialogue, or dialectic, between all members of the learning community occurs.
- Learners are grouped heterogeneously by developmental level rather than age.
- Facilitators regard themselves as co-learners, or partners in learning.
- Learner-centered, rather than teacher-centered, cooperative and collaborative learning scenarios are implemented.
- Freedom, movement, choice and empowerment are facilitated and nurtured for all community members.
- Self-expression is sought, facilitated and developed.
- Fine arts skills and abilities are valued and are developed in all learners because of the critically important role they play in the facilitation of self-expression and positive self-perception.
- Learners are invited and encouraged to develop and broaden personal horizons, their unique interests and creativity.
- Divergent as well as convergent thought are developed.

CURRICULA

The Traditional School

- Curricula do not build on learners' prior experience and interests.
- Discrete subjects are studied independent of other subjects.
- A subject hierarchy exists in which math and science are regarded as important - the language arts are important as support systems, social studies is not so important (frequently defined only in terms of climate, geography and economics), and art, music, dance, drama and physical education are not important at all (if they are present in curricula).

The School of Transcendence

- Curricula build on learner's prior experience and interests. Projects are selected by learners rather than dictated by the teacher.
- Curricula are integrated and interdisciplinary, not disparate, and subject hierarchy does not exist.
- The fine arts are valued and are used to facilitate self-expression and positive self-perception.
- Diversity is valued and highlighted rather than compensated for.

PLANNING AND SCHEDULING

The Traditional School

- The scheduling of blocks of time is rigid and arbitrary.
- Learners are grouped *homogeneously* by perceived ability levels and by age.

The School of Transcendence

- Large blocks of time for teacher-learner collaboration, planning and learning are provided - teacher and learner are involved in a partnership wherein reciprocity, mutual respect and learning occur simultaneously between teacher and learner.
- Learners develop ownership of learning encounters through assisting in their conception, planning and development.
- Learners are grouped *heterogeneously* by developmental level, not by age.

ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION

The Traditional School

- Teaching strategies, assessment and evaluation predispose some learners for success and many for mediocrity or failure.

- Formalized standardized testing instruments used are culturally biased and are not responsive to learners' economic status, to divergent thought, divergent learning styles or a learner's personal existential sphere.

The School of Transcendence

- Collaborative evaluation is performance criteria based, and is never subjectively implemented. Failure is not within the lexicon of transcendent evaluatory discourse. All children are assisted in the pursuit and achievement of success.
- Authentic, formative, non-biased assessment and evaluation are implemented - standardized tests are not given.
- Learner progress is documented *qualitatively* in the form of dialogue, journals, portfolios and multimedia. Cumulative progress is never reduced to a letter grade. Letter grades are regarded as inadequate vehicles for characterizing an individual's developmental progress.
- Learners are taken seriously in terms of their ability to make responsible and creative decisions, and to create and assess their own learning and developmental progress.

PHYSICAL SPACE

The Traditional School

- Physical school structures are dark or unnaturally bright, dull, cold, hard, rigid, aesthetically negative, ominous, restrictive maze-like spaces.
- Inside school structure is regarded as the place for learning and outside as the place for physical energy release and amusement.
- The school is regarded as the structure that "houses" learning.

The School of Transcendence

- Physical learning spaces are open, cheerful, beautiful, airy, community-inducing structures where the inside bleeds into the outside. Both sides of school walls, as well as beyond the

campus, are regarded as equally valid learning spaces. Field trips, for example, are viewed as supreme learning encounters.

- The physical environment is not regarded as the structure that "houses" learning, but as the home base where powerful learning encounters are planned and initiated.

SCHOOL COMMUNITY INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

The Traditional School

- Rigid hierarchy and interpersonal relational plasticity exist between principal, teacher, parent, and particularly, between teacher and learner. Teacher and learners are not equal partners in the relationship. Relationships are not reciprocal.
- It is assumed that many learners will not be successful and that only *some* have gifts and talents (corresponding assumption - gifts and talents can be identified through formal testing).

The School of Transcendence

- Close interpersonal relationships between all community members are developed to facilitate intense and creative collaboration.
- Regular meetings occur between administrators and teacher, parents and learners with family involvement nights, days; lunches and picnics. Deep interpersonal relationships are sought, established and facilitated between all personnel, learners and community individuals.
- Open, two-way dialogue between all members of the learning community is ongoing.

TRADITIONAL SCHOOLS AS PLACES OF VIOLENCE

The atmosphere of the school of transcendence, as described, is one of physical, emotional, social and economic safety. By contrast, the traditional school, as described, suggests a violent, therefore unsafe environment. Violence is defined here as an external force that inflicts

social, economic, emotional, cognitive and physical pain and suffering, and also imposes the denial of opportunity. The identified traditional school cannot be regarded as safe or as learner-centered, and teachers who uphold such traditional environments cannot be regarded as learner advocates. Elements of violence identified in the traditional school include:

- physical violence that may occur frequently. It is legal to strike children in schools in many states, and even to inflict bruises on them. Corporal punishment is recognized in this discussion as sanctioned violence.
- social violence that occurs when learners are ostracized if they are unsuccessful. Learners are also ostracized if they come from social, economic and ethnic minority groups (e.g., African-Americans, Buddhists, Gay, Lesbian or Bisexual, Homeless learners, etc.).
- emotional and social violence that occurs when teachers humiliate and disrespect learners who are not having a successful learning experience.
- cognitive and social violence that are present when learners are pitted against each other and opportunity is denied because learners are not successful in prescribed, non-responsive, often uni-dimensional learning scenarios.
- economic violence that occurs when opportunity is denied on the basis of one's economic status or on the basis of standardized tests. Even though standardized tests are culturally biased and non-responsive to individual learning styles and needs, low standardized test scores ultimately result in the denial of economic opportunity.
- social, cognitive, emotional and economic violence that occurs when learners are "tracked" against their will, and cognitive and economic opportunity is subsequently denied on the basis of that tracking.

GOVERNANCE OF THE SCHOOL OF TRANSCENDENCE

Unlike the authoritarian governance present in the traditional school that is based on hierarchy, power, submission and punishment, the transcendent school is non-hierarchized, and

governed through egalitarian sharing of authority and responsibilities by all personnel. Punishment is regarded as a destructive and ultimately ineffective approach to modifying human behavior and output. Personnel endeavor to understand the causes of negative behavior and to respond positively to learner needs. All policy, rules and regulations are collaboratively developed by all personnel. All school responsibilities are pooled in the form of a list. Responsibilities on the list are distributed equitably among all personnel.

A team of coordinators, who assume coordinator positions voluntarily for a specified term, perform most of what have been traditionally regarded as administrative duties. Coordinators act to facilitate the implementation of policy through maintaining the lines of communication between various other teams and through supporting personnel in the performance of their various team and individual responsibilities. There are no titles among personnel in the school of transcendence. An individual's responsibilities on a given day could include, for example, answering the phone, hosting a tea with an international focus for learners and faculty, facilitating a learner team to clean windows or floors, facilitating a team of learners to design a courtyard garden, or facilitating learners to write a book about that garden. Assignments are not ranked according to personnel hierarchy because such a hierarchy does not exist. All personnel are regarded as equal players. The sharing of responsibilities is such that it would not occur to faculty to say, "I'm sorry, that's not my job." Pay for all personnel is equal.

TRANSCENDENCE-ORIENTED APPROACHES IMPLEMENTED IN REGGIO EMELIA SCHOOLS

The early childhood programs in the town of Reggio Emelia, Italy have been visited by over 10,000 international educators because of their extraordinary approach to facilitating young children's development. These schools were conceived and built by the hands of parents in Reggio Emelia immediately following World War II. Reggio Emelia educators welcome visitors to the schools to stimulate reflection about teaching. Characteristics of the Reggio Emelia schools that approximate, or mirror, those of the school of transcendence are listed below.

- The environment is beautiful and highly personalized. Attention is given to every environmental detail: color, furniture shape, arrangement of objects, the presence of healthy green plants, etc. (Hendrick, 1997).

- Children are recognized as active constructors of their own learning through social process (Hendrick, 1997). Teachers are deeply aware that children have preparedness, curiosity and interest in constructing their own learning. They are viewed by teachers as capable of engaging in social interaction and of negotiating everything in their environment (Gandini, 1993).

- Relationships between teachers, parents, children and the community are reciprocal and interconnected (Gandini, 1993). When parents, children and teachers plan a task, it is a mutual choice and is carried out with strong motivation and engagement (Hendrick, 1997).

- Teachers view themselves as partners with children in the learning process. Teachers enjoy and celebrate the process of discovery with children. Teachers talk with children to explore their theories and ideas, and teachers and learners subsequently develop learning encounters together (Gandini, 1993). An overarching spirit of cooperation is present at all times (Hendrick, 1997). "Children's own sense of time and their personal rhythm are considered in planning and implementing activities and projects" (Gandini, 1993, p. 6). The schedule provides "sufficient time to complete projects and activities with satisfaction" (Gandini, 1993).

- Relationships between teachers are strong. Teacher-learner relationships are based on mutual respect and trust. Teachers work in pairs as equals. "Schools do not have a director on the premise. They are run by the team of teachers and staff members ... to help teachers with the interpretation of philosophy, to mediate the connections with parents and administrators, to organize training sessions, to follow the development of projects and

activities, and much more." Teachers are assisted toward autonomy, not dependence (Hendrick, 1997, p. 11).

- Curriculum is not pre-established. Instead, teachers have general goals and hypothesize about what direction projects and activities might take (Gandini, 1993).

- "Transcriptions of children's remarks and discussions, photographs of their activity, and representations of their thinking and learning using many media are carefully arranged ... to document the work (and the process of learning) done in the schools" (Gandini, 1993, p. 8). The data provided are used to assess and evaluate childrens' developmental progress, but also help teachers understand children more, maintain parental involvement, facilitate communication and the sharing of ideas, and to help children see that their efforts are valued (Gandini, 1993).

- Taking John Dewey's lead, Reggio Emelia schools strive to make all learning relevant to the lives of all children (Hendrick, 1997). Reggio Emelia schools are non-selective and non-discriminatory.

Again, the Reggio Emelia schools approximate many of the characteristics of the school of transcendence. An investigation to determine the extent of such approximations is beyond the scope of this paper.

METAPHORS FOR THE SCHOOL OF TRANSCENDENCE

Having studied the theory for the school of transcendence developed by graduate students at Towson University, I created a series of metaphors for that school. The metaphors are designed to synthesize the myriad qualities and implications presented by school of transcendence theory.

The school of transcendence as the meeting house where:

- governance is shared.
- all voices are heard and respected.
- decisions are arrived at through group consensus.
- conflict is addressed with care and respect.

The school of transcendence as the kitchen where:

- all participants "cook."
- learning experiences are delectable and tantalizing.
- only fresh, authentic ingredients are used.
- recipes are intercultural and international spices are used.
- chefs are committed to pleasing.
- creativity and daring abound.

The school of transcendence as the artist's studio where:

- the goal is to express oneself creatively.
- the artist and one's work is supported, protected and nurtured.
- the artist has adequate time to reflect and to create.
- there is room to display one's work.
- one feels a sense of ownership of space.
- marvelous projects are created.
- diversity is expected, respected and valued.

The school of transcendence as the rehearsal hall where:

- harmony and dissonance are desired and created.
- people share vision and common goals.
- the atmosphere is full of anticipation.

- efforts lead to performance before an audience.
- people are free and feel safe to make mistakes as they develop skills and creativity.

The school of transcendence as the architect's drawing board where:

- projects are conceived.
- new ideas are developed and recorded.
- a broad spectrum of concerns, regulations, needs and desires are integrated into the design.
- sharing of ideas and collaboration occurs.
- vision is given form and dimension.
- details and glitches are worked out on paper.
- plans and drawings are created with full intention for their implementation.

The school of transcendence as the dinner table where:

- nourishment is served and enjoyed.
- protocol and good manners are observed.
- the atmosphere is stimulating and is multisensory.
- people are drawn close intellectually, physically and spiritually.
- dialogue is engaging.

The school of transcendence as the market where:

- many products are examined and evaluated.
- choice is of the utmost importance.
- quality and value are sought.
- products are organized appropriately.
- judgement is applied.
- relevance and attraction are critical.
- people learn through experience.

The school of transcendence as the counseling center where:

- people feel safe to express themselves.
- individual experience is valued and regarded as relevant.
- personal growth is fundamental.
- problems are mediated.
- sharing is the primary learning medium.
- transformation is desired and facilitated.
- violence is not present, and when it is, it is purged.

The school of transcendence as the stage where:

- human experience is portrayed.
- topics for presentation are infinite.
- great meaning is expressed.
- human experience is integrated and valued.
- humor, art, music, drama and dance are premium commodities.
- people experience other's hope, pain, joy, love, laughter, etc. vicariously.
- one can learn what it means to walk in another's shoes.
- creativity is of paramount importance.

The school of transcendence as the courtroom where:

- component parts are analyzed.
- determinations and judgements are made.
- protocol is observed.
- many points of view are critically examined from two or more frames of reference.
- expert opinion is sought.
- judgement is passed.

The school of transcendence as the cafe where:

- people meet to share, to enjoy, to be stimulated and to be authentic.
- atmosphere helps to create powerful and beautiful moments.
- manners matter.
- people feel warm, comforted and nurtured.
- conversation is encouraged as an opportunity to expand.

The school of transcendence as the sacred space where:

- people feel whole and in touch with a higher power.
- people can return home.
- something beyond the ordinary can occur.
- something larger than the component parts is present.
- one is loved for being oneself.
- magic sparkles.

The school of transcendence as the beach where:

- all individuals play together.
- there are no badges of office and no bosses.
- the environment is enjoyed, admired and respected.
- there is time for reflection.
- beauty and aesthetics are abundant.

CONCLUSION

The school of transcendence theorized by graduate students at Towson University is unique in concept and design. Nonetheless, it is significant that many of the qualities and characteristics of the extant Reggio Emelia schools mirror those of the school of transcendence. Educators

seeking to restructure learning environments can look to the Reggio schools and note several transcendence-oriented approaches actually being practiced successfully.

The school of transcendence goes beyond the theory and practice of the traditional school as defined in this discussion. The school of transcendence is a place of genuine human equality, mutual respect, trust, flexibility and abundant opportunity. Learning encounters are conceived as safe, lively, vital and intensely collaborative. Dialogue between all transcendent school community members is intended to be continuous and mutually beneficial. Creativity and diversity are valued and nurtured. Physical environments are cheery and beautiful in the school of transcendence. The interpersonal transcendent environment as conceived is bathed in the power and grace of human dignity.

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